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USDA's subsidized-meal-program certification to undergo review

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Abstract (Summary)

A proposed rule by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that would seek to improve the USDA's ability to verify whether students receiving free or reduced-price meals are actually eligible under federal income guidelines. Several newspaper reports have stated that as many as 25% of students receiving the federally subsidized meals come from homes whose parents make too much money to qualify.

Full Text (374 words)

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ALEXANDRIA, VA. - The process the federal government uses to certify students as eligible for free or reduced-price school meals may need to be revamped if it is to be successful, the American School Food Service Association told the Office of Management and Budget.

"The verification process, which is serving as one of the prime indicators of overcertification, may not be a good barometer of the accuracy of the application process," said ASFSA president Gaye Lynn MacDonald in a letter to the OMB.

MacDonald wrote the letter in response to a proposed rule by the U.S. Department of Agriculture that would seek to improve the USDA's ability to verify whether students receiving free or reduced-price meals are actually eligible under federal income guidelines.

The USDA drew up the rule in the wake of several newspaper reports stating that as many as 25 percent of students receiving the federally subsidized meals come from homes whose parents make too much money to qualify. The proposal currently is open for public comment.

MacDonald, in her letter to the OMB, made it clear that the ASFSA supports the intent of the USDA rule.

The letter stated: "However, beyond the specific requirements of the proposed rule, there are data that are not being collected which we feel will help inform the discussion about the extent to which the problem of overcertification may exist."

Among the problems with the verification process is the amount of transiency in many inner-city schools. Children who are eligible, MacDonald said, could fall into the cracks as they move from one school to another in the course of a year.

"Determining the extent of this effect probably will lead to a significant decline in the number of assumed ineligibles," she noted.

Other drawbacks to the process are households that do not respond to the verification request, either because of language barriers or "an innate fear of responding to such questions," which is particularly true among recent immigrants, MacDonald said.

Finally, MacDonald pointed out, "the current eligibility guidelines are based on decades of old standards of poverty. There is some question about whether these standards are a fair assessment of need."

The USDA will review the rule after the public comment period has ended this month.

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